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Right person, right place

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WASHINGTON — As described by those who know him, Lt. Col. Oliver L. North Jr. is the perfect person to engineer a multinational scheme that would result in up to \$30 million in Iranian money being secretly diverted to assist the rebels fighting to overthrow the Nicaraguan government.

The 43-year-old career Marine officer, they say, has all the "right stuff" — the intelligence, the fiery personality and the bravado — to try to pull off such a deal involving jacked-up prices for American arms and numbered Swiss bank accounts.

And most of all he was in the right position to pull it off: inside the White House. As a deputy director for the National Security Council, North was able to operate free of the usual bureaucratic restrictions that bind the conduct of State Department diplomats and unfettered by the congressional oversight that binds covert action by agents for the Central Intelligence Agency.

As head of the NSC's political-military affairs, North has been involved in a wide range of foreign hot spots for the Reagan administration. Since the invasion of Grenada in 1983, he has played a role in providing support for the rebels in Afghanistan and Angola, and coordinated the capture of the Achille Lauro terrorists. But, according to congressional sources, North's overriding concern since joining the NSC has been coordinating, if not directing, the Reagan administration's support for the Nicaraguan rebels, who are known as contras.

North's role in the contra effort came during the nearly two-year period in which the United States was officially prohibited from providing any military aid for the contras. Despite that prohibition, there was little doubt during the period about what the president wanted to do for the rebels: at one

point earlier this year, Reagan invited several of their leaders to the White House and, grasping their hands in a victory salute, declared, "I am a contra."

With such gestures from Reagan, North, according to congressional sources, felt free to coordinate a private network of Americans and others to provide financial resources for the contras. A report prepared by the staff of Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.) alleged that North, assisted by several other former military officers, set up the network that was used to ship weapons and other military equipment to the rebels.

Through a spokesperson at the NSC, North has denied the charges. Congressional sources said recently, however, that North is scheduled to be questioned by investigators from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee about the allegations and has retained private counsel.

"Oliver North cares deeply enough about the contra cause that he would do anything, I repeat anything, to assist them,"

said an independent television producer who had several meetings with North last year in an effort to film a show on the contras.

"I think he saw himself as a patriot in the truest sense," said the producer, who asked that he not be identified. "He was carrying out a secret mission for the president because Congress wouldn't let the president act for himself."

But North's role in the contra aid network began to leak out this year as questions about the network became the focus of numerous news stories. Those questions intensified last month after it was reported that North's White House office had received numerous phone calls from the Salvador safe house used by the airmen who had been involved in the secret mission, flying military supplies to the contras inside Nicaragua.

While his tactics have been widely criticized, North's reputation inside the White House and his access to policy-making superiors has been envied. Robert McFarlane, former national secu-

rity adviser, whom North accompanied on a trip to Tehran last July, has previously praised North's abilities and described him as "like a son." Also aboard on that trip was retired Major Gen. Richard Secord, who reportedly played a key role in the contra supply mission.

Congressional sources also said yesterday that North maintained close links to officials inside the CIA, chiefly through two NSC assistants, Vincent Cannissaro and Marine Lt. Col. Robert Earle.

A native of San Antonio, North graduated from the US Naval Academy. He served as a Marine platoon and company commander in Vietnam, participating in conventional and unconventional warfare, according to his official 1983 biography. While in Vietnam, he was awarded the Silver Star and two Purple Hearts. He has taught at the FBI Academy and at the Marine Corps Basic School. Before coming to the NSC, he served in policy and planning for the Marines.

North's activities inside the White House have not all been shrouded in secrecy. In one speech he gave on the administration's foreign policy, he said that the United States should cease talking "tough" and begin a policy of quiet action. Also, he periodically participated in background briefings for corporate leaders about the Reagan administration's role in Central America.

One person who attended several of the sessions said that North's understanding of the foreign policy implications and his grasp of the military detail overshadowed the speeches given that day on the same subject by McFarlane, Secretary of State George Shultz and Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger.

"It was very strange to me that North knew as much as he did," said one businessman in attendance. "He seemed to be the one in command, not all these others."